

Brihadeshwara Temple

Brihadeshwara Temple (Tamil:Peruvudaiyar Kovil) is a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva located in Thanjavur in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is also known as *Periya Kovil*, *RajaRajeswara*

Temple and *Rajarajeswaram*. It is one of the largest temples in India and is an example of Dravidian architecture during the Chola period. Built by emperor Raja Raja Chola I and completed in 1010 AD, the temple turned 1000 years old in 2010.^[4] The temple is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site known as the "Great Living Chola Temples", with the other two being the Brihadeeswarar Temple, Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Airavatesvara temple.

The temple stands amidst fortified walls that were probably added in the 16th century. The vimanam (temple tower) is 216 ft (66 m) high and is the tallest in the world. The Kumbam (the apex or the bulbous structure on the top) of the temple is carved out of a single rock and weighs around 80 tons. There is a big statue of Nandi (sacred bull), carved out of a single rock measuring about 16 ft (4.9 m) long and 13 ft (4.0 m) high at the entrance. The entire temple structure is made out of granite, the nearest sources of which are about 60 km to the west of temple. The temple is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Tamil Nadu.

The Brihadeswarar temple was built to grace the throne of the Chola empire by the Tamil emperor **Arulmozhiarman, popularly called Rajaraja Chola I**, in compliance to a command given to him in a dream. One of the first great Tamil Chola building projects, the temple's foundations were laid out in 1002

CE. An axial and symmetrical geometry rules the temple layout. Temples from this period and the following two centuries are an expression of the Tamils (Chola) wealth, power and artistic expertise. The emergence of such features as the multifaceted columns with projecting square capitals signal the arrival of the new Chola style.

Intended to display the emperor's vision of his power and his relationship to the universal order, the temple was the site of the major royal ceremonies such as anointing the emperor and linking him with its deity, Shiva, and the daily rituals of the deities were mirrored by those of the king. It is an architectural example showcasing the pure form of the Dravida type of temple architecture and representative of the Chola Empire ideology and the Tamil civilisation in Southern India. The temple "testify to the brilliant achievements of the Chola in architecture, sculpture, painting and bronze casting."

Construction

The architect and engineer of the temple was **Kunjara Mallan Raja Raja Perunthachan** as stated in inscriptions found at the temple. The temple was built per ancient texts called Vaastu Shastras and Agamas. The temple was built using a measure of 1 3/8-inch called an angula (24 units equalling 33 inches called a hasta, muzam, or kishku). This is the same measure found in ancient Lothal and other sites in the Indus Valley dating back 4000 – 6000 years. This same measure is used to build structures compliant with the Vaastu Shastras and Agamas today. While some builders use a different measure this is considered a standard due to its antiquity.

The solid base of the temple raises about 5 metres (16 feet), above which stone deities and representatives of Shiva dance. The big Nandi(bull), weighing about 20 tonnes is made of a single stone and is about 2 m in height, 6 m in length and 2.5 m in width. The presiding deity of lingam is 3.7m tall. The prakaram (outer precincts of the temple) measures 240m by 125m. The outer wall of the upper storey is carved with 108 dance *karanas* – postures of Bharathanatyam, the classical dance of Tamil Nadu. The shrine of Goddess was added by Pandyas during the 13th century, Subramanya Shrine by Vijayanagara rulers and the Vinayaka shrine was renovated by Maratha rulers. There were significant additions from the Thanjavur Nayaks.

Temple complex

The temple complex sits on the banks of a river that was channelled to make a moat around the complex's outer walls, the walls being built like a fortress. The complex is made up of many structures that are aligned axially. The complex can be entered either on one axis through a five-story gopuram or with a second access directly to the huge main quadrangle through a smaller free-standing gopuram. The massive size of the main Vimanam (Shikhara) is ca. 60.96 meters high, with 16 elaborately articulated stories, and dominates the main quadrangle. Pilaster, piers (a raised structure), and attached columns are placed rhythmically covering every surface of the Vimanam. The gopuram of the main entrance is 30 m high, smaller than the vimana. It is unusual in the dravidian architecture where the gopurams are generally the main towers and taller than the vimanam.

Main temple

A first rectangular surrounding wall, 270 m by 140 m, marks the outer boundary. The main temple is in the center of the spacious quadrangle composed of a sanctuary, a Nandi, a pillared hall and an assembly hall (mandapas), and many sub-shrines. The most important part of the temple is the inner mandapa which is surrounded by massive walls that are divided into levels by sharply cut sculptures and pilasters providing deep bays and recesses. Each side of the sanctuary has a bay emphasising the principle cult icons. The *karuvarai*, a Tamil word meaning the interior of the sanctum sanctorum, is the inner most sanctum and focus of the temple where an image of the primary deity, Shiva, resides. Inside is a huge stone linga. The word *Karuvarai* means "womb chamber" from Tamil word *karu* for foetus. Only priests are allowed to enter this inner-most chamber.

In the Dravida style, the *Karuvarai* takes the form of a miniature vimana with other features exclusive to southern Indian temple architecture such as the inner wall together with the outer wall creating a pradakshina around the garbhagriha for circumambulation (pradakshina). The entrance is highly decorated. The inside chamber housing the image of the god is the sanctum sanctorum, the garbhagriha. The garbhagriha is square and sits on a plinth, its location calculated to be a point of total equilibrium and harmony as it is representative of a microcosm of the universe. In the center is placed the image of the deity. The royal bathing-hall where Rajaraja the great gave gifts is to the east of the hall of Irumudi-Soran.

The inner mandapa leads out to a rectangular mandapa and then to a twenty-

columned porch with three staircases leading down. Sharing the same stone plinth is a small open mandapa dedicated to Nandi, Shiva's sacred bull mount.

Adjoining structures

Surrounding the main temple are two walled enclosures. The outer wall is high, defining the temple complex area. Here is the massive gopuram or gateway mentioned above. Within this a portico, a barrel vaulted gopuram with over 400 pillars, is enclosed by a high wall interspersed with huge gopurams axially lined up to the main temple.

Features

A widely held belief is that the shadow of the Vimana never falls on the ground. However, several photographs exist showing the shadow on the ground. The temple is said to be made up of about 60,000 tons of granite. The capstone itself is made of four pieces of granite and weighs about 20 tons., on top of the main *gopuram* is believed to have been taken to the top by creating an inclined slope to the height of 66m to the top of the *gopuram*.

Murals

The temple has Chola frescoes on the walls around the sanctum sanctorum portraying Shiva in action, destroying demonic forts, dancing and sending a white elephant to transport a devotee to heaven. These frescoes, discovered in the 1940s by S. K. Govindasami of the Annamalai University, portray the mythological episodes of the journey of Saint Sundarar and the Chera King to heaven, the battle scene of Tripurantaka (Lord Siva) with *Asuras* (demons). The Chola artists have proved their mettle by portraying even the *Asura* women with a sense of beauty. Some of

the paintings in the sanctum sanctorum and the walls in the passage had been damaged because of the soot that had deposited on them once upon a time. Owing to the continuous exposure to smoke and soot from the lamps and burning of camphor in the sanctum sanctorum over a period of centuries certain parts of the Chola paintings on the circumambulatory passage walls had been badly damaged. The Tanjore Nayak kings replaced them with a few paintings of their own, about 400 years ago. The Archaeological Survey of India, for the first time in the world, used its unique de-stucco process to restore 16 Nayak paintings, which were superimposed on 1000-year-old Chola frescoes. These 400-year-old paintings have been mounted on fibre glass boards, displayed at a separate pavilion.

Temple personnel

Since its consecration in 1010 AD by Raja Raja Chola I, the temple maintained a staff of 1000 people in various capacities with 400 being temple dancers. Besides the Brahmin priests, these included record-keepers, musicians, scholars, and craftsman of every type as well as housekeeping staff. In those days the temple was a hub of business activities for the flower, milk, oil, and ghee merchants, all of whom made a regular supply of their respective goods for the temple for its poojas and during festival seasons. Moreover, as evidenced by the inscriptions that found in the compound wall of this temple, the temple had always served as a platform for dancers who excelled in the traditional dance form of Bharatnatyam.

Millennium commemoration

Built in the year 1010 CE by Raja Raja Chola in Thanjavur, Brihadeeswarar Temple popularly

known as the 'Big Temple' turned 1000 years old in September 2010. To celebrate the 1000th year of the grand structure, the state government and the town held many cultural events. It was to recall the 275th day of his 25th regal year (1010 CE) when Raja Raja Chola (985–1014 CE) handed over a gold-plated kalasam (copper pot or finial) for the final consecration to crown the vimana, the 59.82-metre tall tower above the sanctum.

Commemorative stamps and coins

On 26 September 2010 (Big Temple's fifth day of millennium celebrations), as a recognition of Big

Temple's contribution to the country's cultural, architectural, epigraphical history, a special ₹ 5 postage stamp featuring the 216-foot tall giant Raja Gopuram was released by India Post.

Mumbai Mint issued Rs 1000 Commemorative Coin with the same picture as on the Rs 5 coin. It was the first 1000 Rupees coin to be released in the Republic of India coinage. This coin was a Non Circulative Legal Tender (NCLT).

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